



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

Fact Sheet

PAST ARTIFACT AND CULTURAL HERITAGE INVESTIGATIONS BY U.S. IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE)

ICE RETURNS CULTURAL ANTIQUITIES TO SAUDI AMBASSADOR

On March 6, Department of Homeland Security officials returned to the Saudi Government 132 pounds of ancient coins seized in an investigation after being illegally removed from a shipwreck in the Red Sea. ICE agents in Miami launched an investigation following a tip that led agents to a Key West man who admitted to improperly taking the coins while on a recreational dive in Saudi Arabia in 1994. An Interpol Red Notice posted by Saudi law enforcement provided additional information on the coins and the subject. Records show that the subject communicated in chat rooms that focused on Islamic coins in order to learn how to restore the coins and to solicit possible buyers. Agents, acting in an undercover capacity, engaged the suspect via email eventually identifying themselves as ICE agents and confronting him in person with the facts of the case. The subject surrendered the coins to agents on April 7, 2005 and the coins were administratively forfeited on July 9, 2005.

VASE SEIZED BY ICE FROM GETTY MUSEUM RETURNED TO ITALY

On November 10, 2005, a 2,300-year-old vase that was allegedly smuggled out of Italy and ended up in Los Angeles in the Getty Museum's antiquities collection arrived in Rome, capping a joint effort by Italian authorities, the United States Attorney's Office, and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to return the artifact to its original home. The rare, hand-painted, "Calyx krater," considered one of the best works by renowned Italian vase painter Asteas, has an appraised value of approximately \$350,000. According to the forfeiture complaint filed in the case, the vase was unearthed by a laborer doing maintenance work on Italy's canals during the 1970s. After an initial request in 1999 to have the krater returned under the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty, the Italians intensified their efforts to secure the vase's return in early 2005 because they maintained that the artifact was a crucial piece of evidence in the trial of two Americans on charges of antiquities trafficking.

ICE RETURNS STOLEN COLONIAL MASTERPIECE TO PERUVIAN GOVERNMENT

On July 26, 2005 John P. Clark, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Eduardo Ferraro, the Ambassador of Peru to the United States, announced the return of El altar de Challapampa (The Altar of Challapampa) to the government of Peru. In January 2002, the altarpiece was reported stolen from its temporary location near Lake Titicaca at Challapampa, Peru. In May 2003, after the ICE New York field office launched an investigation, the artifact was discovered in Santa Fe, New Mexico at Ron Messick Fine Arts and Antiquities

(RMFAA). ICE worked closely with the Washington D.C. Interpol office, and the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York to seek criminal prosecution of Messick. Ultimately, however, prosecution was abated due to his poor health, and subsequent death. The executors to his estate voluntarily surrendered the artifact to the Department of Homeland Security, where it would be stored in El Paso, Texas, until given back to the Peruvian government. The altarpiece is a polychrome wooden carving of the angels Michael and Gabriel beneath a crucifixion in four large pieces. The artifact weighs more than 800 pounds, and stands nearly 12 feet tall when assembled.

ICE RETURNS TWO RARE 2,000 YEAR OLD COINS TO PRESIDENT KARZAI OF AFGHANISTAN

On May 23, 2005 in a ceremony at the Smithsonian Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, Assistant Secretary Michael Garcia returned to President Hamid Karzai, two rare coins estimated to be more than 2,000 years old that were looted during unrest in Afghanistan following the departure of Russian forces in 1988. The coins were discovered during a 1971 French-led archeological excavation at Ai Khanoum (on the Oxus River in the Northeastern portion of Afghanistan). These Indo-Greek coins of Agathokles are dated between 171 and 160 B.C. were created following the reign of Alexander the Great. After Russian forces departed Afghanistan in 1988, the two coins were among many artifacts stolen from the Afghan National Museum. In December 2003, the Baltimore ICE Office, acting on a tip received from the Boston ICE office, recovered the two coins from a Maryland coin dealer. If sold in the U.S., the coins would have a fair market value of \$1,000 dollars each.

ICE RETURNS ANCIENT ARTIFACT TO THE GOVERNMENT OF IRAQ

On June 11, 2003 ICE Agents investigated Mr. Joseph Braude, a scholar and Middle East expert, for smuggling 3 Mesopotamian Cylinder Seals from the Third Millennium B.C. stolen from the Iraq Museum in Baghdad into JFK International Airport. The seals, dating back to Iraq's Akkadian period, are believed to be the first cultural artifacts repatriated to Iraq under ICE initiative, Operation Iraqi Heritage. On January 18, 2005 ICE Secretary Michael J. Garcia returned the artifacts to his Excellency Samir Sumaida'ie, the Ambassador of Iraq to the United Nations, during a ceremony at 26 Federal Plaza in New York.

ICE AGENTS SEIZE STOLEN 16th CENTURY MEXICAN ALTARPIECE

In April 2004, ICE agents seized a stolen, 500-year-old Judeo-Christian altarpiece that was being offered for sale at a price of \$225,000 in an art consignment shop in Santa Fe, N.M. The ICE investigation determined that the altarpiece had been stolen in April 2001 from a convent in Puebla, Mexico. ICE is currently protecting the altarpiece and intends to return it to the people of Mexico. The ICE investigation continues.

ICE RETURNS ANCIENT ARTIFACTS TO PERUVIAN GOVERNMENT

In April 2004, ICE returned a variety of recovered artifacts to the government of Peru. The artifacts were seized in three separate ICE investigations into antiquities smugglers and dealers in several states after being smuggled from protected archeological sites in Peru by individuals who sought them for their personal collections or who intended to sell them for profit. Dating from 100 A.D. to 1,530 A.D., the items came from Mochica, Chimu and Chancay cultures. They included a rare mother-of-pearl knife, gold and plaque ornaments, nose jewelry, copper pins, pottery and textile fragments.

ICE RETURNS HISTORIC PISTOL TO SWITZERLAND

In February 2004, ICE returned to Switzerland the oldest surviving example in the world of a prototype self-loading 1898 Borchardt Luger pistol. The pistol was stolen in 1996 from Switzerland's Waffenfabrik museum. After months of investigation, ICE agents in Texas seized the rare pistol from an internationally known antique firearms collector in July 2003. Experts from a British auction house later determined that the 106-year old pistol, worth approximately \$720,000, had been stolen from the Swiss.

ICE RETURNS ANCIENT ARTIFACT TO GOVERNMENT OF YEMEN

In 2001, the Office of the Special Agent in Charge, New York (SAC/NY) initiated an investigation on Phoenix Ancient Art and owners, Hicham and Ali Aboutaam, for trafficking in illegally obtained art & antiquities, both violations of the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Property and the Cultural Property Implementation Act. The Aboutaam brothers, Lebanese nationals with Canadian citizenship, are major suppliers of museum quality antiquities from their galleries in New York, Geneva, Switzerland, and Lebanon. In May 2003 Aboutaam's attempted to sell, via Sotheby's auction, the South Arabian Alabaster Stele for approximately \$20,000 - \$30,000 USD. Sotheby's verified the identity of the Stele and declined to auction this artifact. Meanwhile, the ICE Attaché, Rome assisted and obtained proof from Yemen authorities that the Stele was in fact stolen from their Aden Museum in 1994 during political unrest. On September 5, 2003, the SAC/NY executed a Seizure Warrant at Sotheby's and took possession of the Stele pursuant to Title 18 USC 545, 981 (a)(1)(C) and Title 19 USC 1595a(c). On December 31, 2003, the Stele was finally forfeited to the U.S. government. The investigation of Phoenix Ancient Art resulted in the arrest and conviction of Hicham Aboutaam. The steel was returned to the Ambassador of Yemen to the United States last December 1.

ICE RETURNS 14th CENTURY MANUSCRIPT TO VIENNA JEWISH COMMUNITY

In November 2003, ICE returned a 14th-century Hebrew manuscript, stolen by the Nazis during World War II, to the Jewish Community Organization of Vienna, Austria. The manuscript is one of the oldest versions of the Kabalistic text known as "Sepher Yetzirah" and is valued at approximately \$68,000. The ICE investigation began in March 2002, when a newspaper article reported that the manuscript was to be sold at a New York auction house. The probe revealed that Aaron Stefansky, a U.S. citizen, had smuggled the manuscript into the United States after purchasing it from an antiquities dealer in Israel. On June 10, 2002, New York ICE agents seized the manuscript after determining that it had been stolen by the Nazis from the Jewish community in Austria. The auction house agreed to retain custody of the manuscript pending the outcome of the investigation. In March 2003, Stefansky was arrested and pleaded guilty for his role in smuggling the manuscript for commercial purposes. Stefansky was later sentenced in the Southern District of New York.

ICE RETURNS 1,400-YEAR-OLD ARTIFACTS TO HONDURAS

In September 2003, ICE returned 279 smuggled Pre-Columbian artifacts to the government of Honduras. The Pre-Columbian artifacts, which included ornate figurines, bowls, and pottery made by the Mayan culture in Honduras between approximately 600 and 900 A.D., had been purchased in Honduras and illegally smuggled to the United States in 1998. In 1998, Douglas Hall, 45, of Ohio, and Tulio Monterroso-Bonilla, 39, of Guatemala, traveled to Honduras where they purchased the artifacts for \$11,000, according to a federal indictment. The items were then shipped through Miami and falsely declared as having a value of \$37. They were later offered for sale at a shop in Ohio. ICE investigators discovered that the articles had been smuggled, and in June 2002, a federal grand jury

in Ohio indicted Hall and Monterroso-Bonilla in connection with the smuggling effort. Hall was convicted in Oct. 2002. Monterroso-Bonilla pleaded guilty in August 2002.

ICE AGENTS RECOVER THOUSANDS OF TREASURED IRAQI ARTIFACTS

In March 2003, before hostilities began in Iraq, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deployed a team of agents to the Middle East at the request of the U.S. Central Command to look for evidence of U.S. companies that may have supplied Iraq with weaponry. Building on this mission, ICE agents played a critical role in recovering artifacts missing or looted from the Iraqi National Museum. After reports of looting from Iraqi museums first surfaced, the ICE team launched an immediate art recovery effort with the U.S. military. ICE agents worked with curators at the Iraq National Museum to catalogue missing items. They also launched a campaign to prompt the return of items by advertising rewards and an amnesty for anyone voluntarily returning artifacts. As the campaign progressed, ICE developed information on the location of secret vaults in Iraq where artifacts had been stored before the war. To date, these efforts have resulted in roughly 1,000 missing artifacts and 39,500 manuscripts recovered. Among these was the fabled "Treasure of Nimrud," a collection of more than 600 precious items dating back to the Assyrian civilization in 800 B.C., which ICE agents located in a vault under the Central Bank of Iraq. ICE agents have also recovered a priceless vase from the 5th Century B.C. and a statue of an Assyrian king dating back to 900 B.C.

ICE RETURNS STOLEN PAINTING TO THE GOVERNMENT OF ARGENTINA

On November 22, 1997, the "Corrida De Torros" painting was stolen from a private home in Argentina. The New York Art Loss Registry notified ICE that the painting was going to be auctioned at Christie's New York on May 28, 2003. ICE Agents from the New York office launched an investigation and determined that the owner/consignor of the painting to Christie's was foreign correspondent for a U.S. media outlet that was stationed in Argentina. The correspondent stated that he purchased the painting in 1999 at a legitimate auction in Uruguay and later asked a family member to transport the painting back to the United States. He agreed to voluntarily surrender the painting to ICE, and Martin D. Ficke, Special Agent in Charge in New York, returned the painting to Ambassador Héctor Timerman, Consul General of Argentina in a ceremony attended by officials from the Art Loss Registry, Interpol, and staff from the U.S. Attorney office for the Southern District of New York.

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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.